SACRED HISTORY BEYOND HISTORY:
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE KITĀB MAQTAL AL-ḤUSAYN BY ABŪ MIKHNAF

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Introduction

The early account of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 774), known under the title Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn (the book of the killing of Ḥusayn), narrates in detail the greatest tragedy in the dawning history of Islam, a tragedy which took place in the plain of Karbalā' on the tenth day (*ʿāshūrā*) of the month of Muḥarram AH 61 (10 October 680). In that day, the grandson of the Prophet, al-Ḥusayn (d. 680), all of his supporters and some members of his family were killed and slaughtered by Muslim troops sent by ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād, governor of the city of Kūfah under the Caliphate of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiyah (d. 683), the second ruler of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). Abū Mikhnaf's account of the regrettable event poses to the scholar in Islamic Studies a challenging question: to what extent this material can be considered historical? The present essay will try to shed some light on this problem. First, the arguments suggesting that the material could be considered as sound and historical will be provided. Secondly, the reasons undermining the historicity of the account will be analyzed. Lastly, a new perspective on the problem will be offered, trying to overcome the question through a broader point of view.

Evidence of the historical accuracy of the account

It is possible to evidence three main factors which would allow to state that the account made by Abū Mikhnaf could possess historical significance and reliability: (i) the general consensus of historians; (ii) Abū Mikhnaf's temporal proximity to the happenings; (iii) the intellectual honesty showed by the author under certain circumstances.

The first two points will be discussed together, as they have been closely associated by the scholars Jafri and Vaglieri. The detailed and comprehensive account by Abū Mikhnaf has been generally considered by Shīʿī, Sunnī and Western historians as the most important and

ancient source for the events of Karbalā'. In this respect, according to Jafri the scholars who have analyzed the account of Mikhnaf 'have found him generally the most reliable and authentic writer on the annals of Kufa and Iraq under the Umayyad'[1]. The Italian scholar Vaglieri highlights the centrality of Mikhnaf in Muslim historians reporting the event of Karbalā', showing how both al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī relied on the account of Mikhnaf directly or through the disciple of Mikhnaf, Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī.[2] Nowadays, Mikhnaf's original work seems to be lost and 'that which has reached us has been transmitted through his student'[3]. That transmission 'is confirmed as authentic by the corroborating evidence of reports in other historians, particularly Balādhurī, which have come to Abū Mikhnaf through a different transmission'[4]. Comparing the translation of the Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn made by Mavani with the one of the history of al-Ṭabarī made by Howard, it is possible to notice that these two versions are almost identical in the contents related to Karbalā'. Furthermore, the character of reliability of Mikhnaf's story is reinforced by the fact that the *isnāds* are often very brief, with just one or two chain of transmitters going back to contemporary witnesses.[5] According to Jafri, Mikhnaf 'does not take his material from predecessors or far-distant sources, but rather collects it himself by enquiring in the most diverse directions from all possible people who could have first-hand information or who had been present to see and hear for themselves.'[6]

Finally, in the text itself there are some evidences which could strengthen the idea that Mikhnaf was sincere in his endeavour. For example, in two instances he admits that he did not have transmitted an event because no witnesses were present at that time.[7] In particular, he distinguishes between the speculations surrounding the meeting between Ḥusayn and Ibn Saʿd and their actual conversation, which is not reported because there were no eyewitnesses.[8] In this case, Mikhnaf does not attempt to create a fictional story and the proven facts are distanced from the opinions and whispering of people about the aforementioned reunion.

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[1] S. Husain M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shiʿa Islam*, London: Longman, 1979, 212.

[2] Laura Veccia Vaglieri, '(al-)Ḥusaynb.ʿAlīb.Abī Ṭālib.', in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006. <http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0304> (14 February 2012).

[3] Abu Mikhnaf, Kitab maqtal al-Husayn, translated by Hamid Mavani, np, nd. <http://www.sicm.org.uk/knowledge/Kitab%20Maqtal%20al-Husayn.pdf> (14 February 2012), 7.

[4] Al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-*Ṭabarī: The Caliphate of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiyah*, volume XIX, translated and annotated by J.K.A. Howard, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, X.

[5] Jafri, The Origins, 214.

[6] Jafri, The Origins, 212.

[7] Cfr. Mikhnaf, Kitab, 73-74, 111.

[8] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 111.

Evidence of the lack of historical accuracy of the account

On the other hand, the consideration of the account as a reliable and historical report is weakened by the following arguments: (i) the evident Shīʿī disposition of Mikhnaf could have shaped facts; (ii) the miracles he reports surrounding Ḥusayn and his followers seem to suggest a religious orientation of the book, instead of a historical one. Moreover, these miracles confer a lack of realism in some portrayed facts.

The Shīʿī temperament of Mikhnaf could be easily inferred by the titles of his writings and the contents of the Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn itself. The books ascribed to him by Ibn al-Nadīm in his Kitāb al-Fihrist clearly indicate Mikhnaf's concern with Shīʿī events and characters, as ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.[9] As far as the Shīʿī contents of the Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn are concerned, they unequivocally convey embryonic Shīʿī doctrines. These doctrines are mirrored in the letters sent to Ḥusayn from the Kūfans requesting to be guided by an *imām*[10], or in the letter sent from Ḥusayn to the Kūfans, where the concepts of ahl al-bayt, *wilāyah* and the right to 'execute the Prophet's functions' ('We are from his family and those entrusted with his authority') are clearly stated.[11] These reflections may lead to consider the work of Mikhnaf, if not as an unreliable account, at least as a depiction of events carried out from a rather uncovered Shīʿī point of view, which could have affected the objectivity of the material.

Howard considers the Mikhnaf's account authentically transmitted, but the presence of miracles which benefitted the followers of Ḥusayn during the battle would draw attention to the forged nature of the account.[12] A religious orientation of the book emerges at the expense of its historicity and to some extent a lack of realism is perceivable, especially during the battles. For instance, Mikhnaf reports Ḥusayn cursing Ibn Hawzah, whose stallion unhorses him, at the point that the horseman fells to the ground and dies.[13] Of particular interest is the battle between the Shīʿite Burayr and Ibn Maʿqil. After mutual imprecation, they ask God 'to curse the liar and kill the one who spreads falsehood'. Of course the Shīʿite, supporter of 'the guided and truthful imam' ʿAlī, receives divine protection; while the blows of his enemy do not affect him, his blow kills Ibn Maʿqil.[14]

[9] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 7-8.
[10] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 24-26.
[11] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 34.
[12] Al-Ṭabarī, The History, X.
[13] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 142.
[14] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 143.

The Aufhebung and the history beyond history

From a strict historical point of view solving the impasse would not be straightforward. What will be suggested here is to consider the question from another point of view, philosophically capable of conserving and transcending the depicted duality. The Hegelian German term "Aufhebung" conveys at the same time the contradictory qualities related to the ideas of "preserving" and "changing" and it is usually translated in English as "sublation".[15] The history depicted in the Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn projects the events beyond the sheer historical reality on the plane of the sacred history, where the characteristics of al-Ḥusayn and his followers are identified tout court with goodness, while the characteristics of the Umayyad are identified tout court with badness. The struggle of the Shīʿites against social injustice reached in this way universal and cosmic dimensions. In the account of Mikhnaf, al-Ḥusayn and his followers are portrayed as enshrining all the good human qualities and as examples of Qur'ānic moral virtues[16], while their enemies are characterized by thirst for power and are capable of every atrocity, as killing children[17] or plundering and mutilating the corpse of the grandson of the Prophet[18]. Al-Ḥusayn is portrayed as patient under difficulties and acceptant the Will of God[19]; he is just and faithful and does not try to attack the enemy first, even when the conditions would have been favourable for him[20]; he continues to pray and to send benedictions to his followers even during battle time[21].

The problem of the historicity of Mikhnaf's account becomes thus less important in comparison to the relevance that this history-beyond-history has had in influencing Islamic Shīʿī identity and self perception. Shīʿites conceived themselves from that point of history as the persecuted community living under an illegitimate authority. The victory of the Umayyad became their ideological defeat, as they were perceived as unjust rulers who betrayed Islam and killed the beloved grandson of the Prophet, who showed often his loving affection for his grandson.[22] Whether Mikhnaf's account is reliable or just partially reliable, the sacred and meta-history displayed in it has had a dramatic influence on history itself, changing the self-

[15] G. W. F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 (originally published 1807), 109.
[16] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 151.
[17] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 164.
[18] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 170.
[19] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 124.
[20] Cfr. Mikhnaf, Kitab, 103, 129.
[21] Cfr. Mikhnaf, Kitab, 150, 155.
[22] Al-Ṭabarī, The History, 176.

perception of Shīʿites and performing a 'complete revolution in the religious consciousness of the Muslims'[23].

Finally, another aspect is worth consideration. The Kitāb Maqtal promoted also a new 'ethos of sanctification through martyrdom'[24]. In Mikhnaf's story the most cited verse of the Qur'ān is 'We are from God and to Him is our return' (Q. 2:156). In different occasions al-Ḥusayn shows his readiness to sacrifice himself. He decides to continue his trip towards Kūfah even though he received clear warns that the situation had changed there and he did not have support.[25] He had two dreams predicting his death, one in which the Prophet himself announced him that he was marching to the Prophet.[26] In an interesting dialogue between al-Ḥusayn and his son ʿAlī b. Ḥusayn – who will become the next Imām in Shīʿī history and whose life will be spared because an illness prevented him from fighting at Karbalā' – it is mentioned that dying in the path of truth will be accepted with patience and tranquillity by father and son.[27] This courage is mirrored by the followers of al-Ḥusayn who were ready to fight until the end and did not want to leave their leader, even though he invited them to run off and absolved them from any obligation to him.[28] Jafri suggests that al-Ḥusayn did not quest for power at all, but from the beginning of his journey toward Kūfah his aim was to shake up the Muslim consciousness through his suffering and sacrifice, in order to react to the Umayyad moral torpor and to show the path towards the authentic Islamic values.[29]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of the killing of al-Ḥusayn in Islamic history cannot be overestimated. If the problem of the historicity of Mikhnaf's account is still unsolved, it is almost certain that the killing of al-Ḥusayn by the hands of Muslims did occur, given that his killing has been reported by many sources, regardless party affiliation. Nevertheless, it is not possible to ascertain the details of this event. Some evidence of the historical accuracy of Mikhnaf's account, as well as some evidence of the lack of its historical accuracy, have been briefly analyzed. At the end, a philosophical point of view has been offered, which keeps unsolved the aforementioned duality (historical evidences / non historical evidences), but at

[23] Jafri, The Origins, 202.
[24] Moojan Momen , *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 33.
[25] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 70, 85.
[26] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 100, 116.
[27] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 100.
[28] Mikhnaf, Kitab, 120.
[29] Cfr. Jafri, The Origins, 201-202.

the same time tries to overcome it through the consideration of the projection of events beyond history in the religious Shīʿī consciousness. The qualities of goodness and badness exemplified on the one hand by the al-Ḥusayn and his followers and on the other by the Umayyads, have been projected on an archetypical plane. In this regard, as far as the religious consciousness is concerned, the Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn could be considered more significant than a sheer historical book. It represents a cosmic drama in which the end is known by his main characters from the beginning. The tension towards extinction caused by injustice, but faced with courage and nobility, increases dramatically the emotional strength of the tragedy and causes a sense of identification with the suffering of the Imām, mirroring the persecutions which the Shīʿī believer was forced to bear. Finally, with the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn a missing religious element has been added to Islam: the idea of self-sacrifice. With this concept, Shīʿī Islam was ready to welcome, in later times, the idea of al-*rajʿa*, the return of their beloved Imām, an idea probably influenced also by Christian theological ideas concerning the return of Christ, after his self-sacrifice, at the end of times.

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